DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 371 CG 018 851

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TITLE Group Treatment for Abusive Parents.
PUB DATE 2 Apr 85
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association for Counseling and Development (New York, NY, April 2-5, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; Children; Family Counseling; Family Problems; *Family Violence; *Group Therapy; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Counseling; *Parenting Skills; Parents; Peer Groups; Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

While abusive parents appear to be much like non-abusive parents, some characteristics of the most abusive parents can be described. These abusive parents exhibit traits which include: (1) isolation from close family and friends; (2) unrealistic expectations; (3) a childhood marked by abuse, lack of love, and inconsistent caregiving; (4) negative perceptions of their children; (5) feelings of unworthiness of love; (6) lack of skilled parenting, yet episodes of affection; and (7) fear of helping agencies because these agencies may take their children away from them. Group counseling with peer support can be useful therapy. Participants are encouraged to socialize and contact each other as a method of support network building. This therapy works for volunteer participants. A professional leader should discuss the relationship between parent behavior and child behavior. The leader and paraprofessional facilitator should be parents. Physical abuse is worked on first and parents are taught to think about the best ways to handle difficult situations with children. The leader can then teach age appropriate behavior in children. Group members should complete each stage before beginning a new one. (ABL)

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ED266371

Group Treatment for Abusive Parents

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at

American Association for Counseling

and Development Annual Convention

New York

April 2, 1985

CG 018851

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Abstract

Child abuse is a serious problem requiring the attention of the counseling profession. It is important for counselors to understand abusive parents and to learn to work with them. Abusive parents must develop non-violent parenting skills and overcome the sense of isolation that keeps them locked into a cycle of violence with their children. This paper begins with a discussion of some characteristics of abusive parents and concludes with the presentation of a group treatment model. Many abusive parents do want to stop their abusive behavior but are unable to do so because they lack the skill and support to make or maintain behavior change. This group treatment model is designed for working with those parents who want to change their behavior. It depends on peer interaction and the parents' desire to be socially responsible. There is no evidence that this model will work with non-voluntary clients.

Group Treatment for Abusive Parents

Abusive parents look like other parents. They do not have obvious distinguishing physical characteristics; they are not monsters or even people who hate children. Most of the time they behave like non-abusive parents. It is primarily their violent behavior and angry, blaming thought patterns that separate them from non-abusive parents. Abusive parents are individuals and as such cannot be easily discussed as a group. Yet, because it is important to help counselors learn to work with abusive parents, we will begin by reviewing some characteristics of most abusive parents. This list of characteristics is based on counseling experience with abusive parents and professional literature about family violence.

The first and most important characteristic is that abusive parents are isolated from extended family and close friends. Sometimes isolation is caused by structural issues related to job opportunities or families moving away. Other times it is a conscious and deliberate decision to be away from family members or may occur when people do not have close ties with their family. Although there are many explanations for why people are isolated, the result is that most abusive parents are removed from an active support system. This characteristic has been reported in research studies as well as in many clinical studies. In fact, it is the only characteristic reported to be statistically significant (Starr, 1982) in research comparing abusive and non-abusive parents.

What does it mean to be isolated? It means not having any support. Parents report not knowing where to go for help, not having anyone to call, not having someone to watch the kids so they can get away for even an hour. Being isolated means being alone and feeling alone.

Isolation is a problem even for abusive parents who are married. People often think that isolation is only a problem for single parents but that is not the case. Abusive parents often have trouble with adult interactions so they lack strong friendships or positive intimate relationships. They may have married people who are not supportive or interactive. Even while living with another person, it is possible to be isolated from support. We find that many abusive parents are married to people who support abusive behavior by ignoring family problems and removing themselves psychologically from the family unit.

The second characteristic is that abusive parents have unrealistic expectations. We have been surprised by the expectations that abusive parents have of themselves and their children. They describe beating three-year-old children because they cried at nap time or were messy in the bathroom. Abusive parents are shocked and upset by these behaviors that most parents tend to view as normal. Their expectations are not consistent with what children can deliver so they are consistently disappointed and upset.

An example of an unrealistic expectation presented in a recent group was a parent's description of taking several children to a Big Boy Restaurant to eat and then becoming embarrassed because they were so messy. The embarrassment lead to violent behavior because the parent believed the situation reflected negatively on her. In the group there was a lot of discussion about this incident because it was a familiar experience for many of the parents. Adults who expect several young children to be neat in restaurants will be disappointed because it is not a reasonable expectation. Abusive parents often expect children to behave like "miniature adults." The message they give to their children is: "you should be considerate of me, you should think about my needs, you should not create a problem for me."

The third characteristic is that abusive parents often come from backgrounds where they did not experience love or consistent caretaking from their parents. Because they lacked this experience they may want to be loved and taken care of by their children. Many abusive parents report that their primary reason for deciding to have a baby was to have someone loving and affectionate. They describe their fantasy of having children as creating a mutually affectionate and loving relationship. One mother recently said, "I thought I would be able to depend on my baby." Abusive parents who expect gratitude from children are frequently disappointed in their children and then begin to feel bad about themselves, often adopting a self-pitying attitude which leads to anger and eventually abuse.

A fourth characteristic is that abusive parents have a negative perception of their children. They frequently see their children as behaving maliciously. Abusive parents do not have a balanced view nor do they recognize that a child's behavior will vary between undesirable and desirable. Children are not good or bad all the time, but abusive parents often generalize and view their children as always being negative and bad. This characteristic tends to be most evident in parents of older children.

The fifth characteristic is that abusive parents feel unworthy of love. In order to establish a good rapport and work effectively with abusive parents, it is important to understand that abusive parents have a very negative self image. They report feeling completely unworthy. Their dislike of themselves is rooted deeply in the past and often takes years of counseling work to change. Such negative feelings obviously affect their behavior as well as their perceptions of other people, particularly their children.

The sixth characteristic is that most abusive parents experienced serious conflict and/or abuse in their childhood. These situations become obvious very early in counseling with abusive parents. Many abusive parents were victims of childhood incest as well as other types of abuse and they have often experienced every imaginable type of family conflict. Recognizing this characteristic can help counselors feel empathy rather than anger toward abusive parents. It also provides important information about the kind of role models they have for parenting.

The seventh characteristic is easy to forget because it is not frequently discussed in the family violence literature. Abusive parents have many dimensions to their personality and have periods of nonviolence during which they may be affectionate and warm or at least neutral toward their children. Violence is not the only set of behaviors that abusive parents exhibit. Often violent families appear to be okay when they are around outsiders because they are so enmeshed with each other. This helps explain why so many violent family situations are not noticed by school personnel, family acquaintences, and pediatricians.

The eighth characteristic is that abusive parents rationalize their behavior. Rationalizations, we want to clarify, are not excuses for behavior. Abusive parents integrate their beliefs about abuse into their sense of themselves thus believing that the abusive behavior is okay, unchangeable, and not "that" bad. Counselors hear clients rationalize many kinds of behavior and rationalizing violence is not substantially different. The media presentations of abuse as bizarre or psychotic behavior supports the tendency of many parents to rationalize many types of abuse as "not so bad." Abusive parents can use media presentations to resist getting help to change their behavior.

The ninth characteristic is that abusive parents are threatened by helping agents such as protective services or school counselors. Most abusive parents are used to being criticized; they've been criticized most of their lives. They don't expect people to understand or be nice to them. It is their belief

that helping agents really want to take their children away from them. In fact, the most common reason given by parents for not seeking help sooner is the fear that they would lose their children. Obviously, we have to move, as professionals, to a level of understanding that allows intervention without threatening people. As long as we have a system that justifies at some level people feeling threatened by offers of help, we are going to have difficulty reaching out to people who need our help.

A tenth characteristic is that abusive parents are unskilled as parents. Research is being conducted to determine how to predict child abuse so that it can be stopped before it starts. Perhaps it is more reasonable instead to help all parents become better parents. The process of parenting is very difficult; it requires many skills and much knowledge. If the problem is approached from a positive perspective, one that offers help to everyone, then it is not necessary to label people as deficient in order to facilitate them.

A group model is used because individual counseling is not sufficient for abusive parents. They lack many personal skills and need information about how to change. Self-understanding and insight often does not help people change unless it is supplemented with specific directions. Abusive parents do not seem to benefit from personal insight alone; insight helps to fill in some gaps so that they can begin to make productive changes. Group work provides a supportive environment so that abusive parents can participate in helping themselves and each other. The group model provides the ideal setting for participants to confront issues of loneliness, isolation and misinformation about child development.

GROUP MODEL

After working with abusive parents and using many different counseling and teaching methods, group counseling with peer support seems to be the most effective model. Since isolation and loneliness are a problem for abusive parents, it seems reasonable to select a counseling mode that responds to these problems. Certainly being a member of a group can begin to immediately alleviate the sense of isolation and loneliness that abusive parents feel. They also frequently see themselves as unusual and unlike other people. Again, being in a group is helpful because they begin to recognize that there are other people like them. Group membership also encourages the parents to assume some social responsibility -- the group will only work if they contribute. Success in this setting depends on each parent working within the group. So, they begin to think about other people. The process of helping other people and having to think about other people's problems helps parents who have been isolated and self referenced to focus outside themselves. In fact, the ability to spend time thinking about other people is recognized as an important step toward improvement.

In this group model participants are encouraged to have contact with each other. It is not like standard group counseling where people are asked not to socialize. This model stresses building relationships with people in the group. It is a way to teach the skill of building a support system first with the group members and then later with other people. They call and talk with each other, share rides and sometimes even have family parties.

Group Members

The group members for this model are primarily self-referred or if referred by the courts they are personally committed to changing their abusive behavior. Even court-referrals and hospital-referrals end up being self-referrals of a sort because they are not forced to stay in the group. At this point there is no evidence that this group model would benefit people who are forced to be in treatment. It may work, but it would require modification. The group model has been developed while working with parents who want to quit abusing their kids.

Leadership

There is a leader and a facilitator or co-leaders for the groups. The leader is a professional person who is trained in both child development and group process. The leader knows about child development and the impact of interactions between parent and child. It is very important to show the linkages between parent behavior and child behavior. If a parent cannot understand this linkage, then they can not understand their role in the conflicts with their child. The parents need to see how their behavior interacts with and sometimes actually causes some of the undesired behavior displayed by their children. Facilitators are usually graduate students or paraprofessionals with experience and training in helping others.

Paraprofessionals often have been volunteers in different settings and are interested in helping people. Both the leader and facilitator should be parents. Abusive parents are skeptical about counselors and about parenting so it is very important to establish credibility via experience as a parent.

They view being a parent as very difficult and because they view it as very difficult, they report feeling insulted by having someone who is not a parent tell them how they should handle themselves.

Group Stages

The group goes through various stages. The model is being presented in terms of: 1) the leader's role; 2) the facilitator's role and; 3) the parent's role. Initially, (the first stage) the group members begin by discussing their current abuse situations. They tell what it is like in their homes and begin to describe how they abuse their children. In the beginning the whole truth is not necessary. People can share whatever is comfortable. However, if group members say that they do not engage in any abusive behavior, the leader and facilitator would then intervene to help them acknowledge their anger and fear of hurting their children. While the participants describe what their situation is like, the leader provides the structure for discussion and then talks about such group expectations as regular attendance and willingness to participate. Structure is mandatory. Without structure the group becomes too vague. The parents have to make a commitment to attend each group session because without such a commitment they are likely to attend only when they are in crisis but not when things are going well, thus reducing the effects of positive learning. So the number one requirement is weekly attendance and being prepared to talk. Parents exchange phone numbers and are encouraged to call each other--a technique used by Parents Anonymous. This technique helps parents learn to rely on each other very quickly, compensating for the lack of any positive support systems in their environment.

We explain in the first session that abusing children is not acceptable behavior. The reason for being in this group is to "stop hitting" immediately-- today. What about other kinds of abuse? That is a concern. But we believe that people are not likely to be able to change all types of abusive behavior at once. In a sense physical abuse is the easiest type of abuse to change because it is a concrete, easily identified behavior. Parents recognize when they have or have not hit their children. It takes much longer to help the parents recognize emotional abuse. After the parents in group are able to avoid hitting, the next step is to work to reduce or stop yelling and name calling. In the group it is important to identify the behaviors that are abusive in very specific ways. Terms such as neglect and emotional abuse can create confusion for parents because they often are not aware of what these terms mean.

Obviously some parents continue to hit. When they do, it is discussed in group and they are helped to identify precipitating events and create alternate responses to angry feelings. Physical abuse subsides very quickly and parents begin to feel a sense of control. Once violence in the home is alleviated, the parents become fascinated by all the other changes that occur in response to their behavior change. Certainly when there is less violence in the home, the parents begin to feel better about themselves and they recognize that having positive control is better than threats and angry outbursts. Parents discuss all sorts of feelingsin the group, particularly guilt and shame. It is hard for most of the parents to accept that they can do anything good so they look at the negative aspect -- instead of feeling good about helping the home environment improve, they dwell on the past and

feel bad because they did not make an effort toward improvement sooner. At this point parents in the group begin to really talk about themselves. The leader has to be careful not to let it turn into an "I did something even worse" scenario where parents try to be the worst person in the group. The facilitator, a role based on Egan's leader-participant model, can be very helpful at this juncture by sharing personal feelings which help the parents put their feelings and behavior in perspective. They learn, for example, that nonabusive parents also feel hatred and anger toward their children at times. When the parents begin to discuss their feelings about themselves they begin to recognize similarity in how they each experience themselves. After the parents begin to share their feelings about themselves it is possible to begin to link some of these feelings to their thinking and then to their behavior. The parents can eventually begin to anticipate that certain feelings are more likely to cause them to become upset. Once they realize that feelings are linked to behavior, they can develop methods for intervening before they get angry and lose control. A parent from one group asked, "When am I going to be able to be a parent without thinking so much?" The answer seems clear. For her and probably for most parents the answer is never. Especially for abusive parents it will never be easy, but then it is not easy for most nonabusive parents, either. Being a parent requires making a commitment to think about what is the best way to handle situations with children. The answers are not obvious. Thoughtful parents often find themselves questioning their decisions. Abusive parents have a history of not thinking or questioning but simply of reacting. They have felt no control over their thinking or behavior. The purpose of the group is to help them gain control so that they can think about what they want to do. If parents think about parenting like they think about the other things they do, then they may feel better about themselves and the decisions they make.

In this part of the group the leader introduces the concept of thinking before acting. The leader begins to point out repetitive behaviors by parents that lead to undesirable behavior by children. For example, a parent may complain that she is just not able to engage in her favorite hobby of shopping without being hassled by her children who become whiney and bored. After some examination, the mother reveals that she usually can not get things together to go shopping until early afternoon. Without realizing it, she has been trying to shop at the worst time of the day for her children. After the leader points out the linkage between the mother's behavior and the children's behavior, the rest of the group can help the mother repattern her day to reduce the problems caused by shopping during the children's nap time. The facilitator can also suggest other intervention strategies such as trading babysitting once a week with another group member so that the mother can go out alone for a while.

After the parents begin to feel comfortable linking their behavior with the behavior of their children, the leader can begin to introduce the concept of age appropriate behaviors. Abusive parents often do not realize what types of behavior are reasonable for children at different ages. Many of them had choatic and/or violent childhoods so they are not aware of what is "normal." Certainly if parent's watche television, they may believe that all small children are clean, beautifully groomed and polite. Parents share some common expectations of toddlers such as: They should be very independent and not need constant attention; They will be neat and tidy when eating in a restaurant; They will give love to their parents. These are simply not realistic expectations of young children. Young children are consumed by

their own developmental needs and are not able to accommodate other people's needs. They are curious and therefore want constant answers to questions about the world. Children also lack the coordination to eat neatly most of the time. Although this may sound simplistic, many abusive parents are surprised to discover that their children are behaving normally. Parents have said in group that they believed their children were embarassing them on purpose. It came as a surprise to learn that the children probably were not thinking about the parents at all, but instead were behaving in ways to meet their own needs.

At this point, the ultimate goal is to teach the parents about children and developmentally appropriate behaviors. They can use this information to help them make decisions about how they want to handle discipline issues with their children. With this information the parents have all the basic tools to continue working on their abuse problem. They can separate feelings about themselves and their children, they know how to interupt the negative cycle that leads to abuse and they can implement new and appropriate discipline strategies.

It is difficult to determine how long it should take to get to this stage in the group process because the members and their problems differ so much. However, it is necessary to spend enough time at each stage for the parents to experience a sense of completion with that portion of the process and benefit by progressing to the next step.

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